

# AN INTERVIEW WITH RUSS NICHOLSON

Interview conducted by Thorin Thompson



Russ Nicholson, born in Glasgow, Scotland, is a British illustrator whose black and white art style and intense line work is known far and wide to gamers of all ages. Russ is best known for his work on the *Fighting Fantasy* Gamebooks series, most notably



Russ Nicholson

*The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, numerous *Games Workshop* products such as *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *Warhammer 40,000* and their house zine *White Dwarf*. Russ was also one of the key illustrators for many of the (now classic) monsters in the original 1979 *Fiend Folio* for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*.

The following interview was conducted under a Full Harvest Moon on Friday the 13th, September 2019.

**Hello Russ, Thanks for speaking with me!**

Not a problem! I was only late by the way because my wife said, "You must eat FIRST!"

(After a hearty chuckle we dove straight into the interview!)

## THE EARLY YEARS

**Have you always been interested in drawing fantasy?**

Yes, I suppose I could say it was grandmother who first inspired me. She used to tell me a lot of fairy stories and so on, and she introduced me to a book even before I could read (read properly that is) which was Andrew Lang's, *The Red Fairy Book*. I was fascinated by the pictures. Since then I've always loved anything to do with art and drawing.

**Out of all the monsters, fiends, and demons you've drawn throughout the years is there anything in particular you love drawing above all the rest?**

I have a sneaking regard for goblins and sprites, and I love drawing dragons mainly because there was a legend in the small village where I grew up about dragon being slain by Saint Serf. Of course there's no such evidence that he did, or was anywhere near it, but that was the legend when I was a little boy, and I did a couple of drawings and made up my own little stories based off that.

**How did you end up becoming a full time illustrator?**

Funny enough actually when I was a lad I wanted to do cartoons. I had this dream to draw for the '*Beano*,' a British comic book, that's still going actually. I wrote DC Thomson, the publisher, and asked, "How do I get a job as a cartoonist," and sent along a couple examples of my work. The letter that came back basically said, "We don't train artists, we expect them to have a degree in art."



Above: 'The Knight & Dragon'

So I therefore realized I needed to stay on in school, which I did... I went to Perth, then to Dundee, which is where DC Thomson existed, though that's not the reason for choosing that college. Once I got my degree I contacted DC Thomson again and they said, "Oh no, we don't take students that have degrees, we like to train our own!" True story...

**Then what happened?**

Well in simple English, I realized comics wasn't the job for me. Fast forward a few years later, whilst I was teaching art classes, I met someone that got me into drawing comics, and who did they work for? Oh yeah, DC Thomson! So I ended up working for them after all for about 7 years.



And was that your first published gig?

No, no, no! I realized early on that the place to be was London, but I had no money to move. So I got an agent and she found me some work, but things were rather sporadic, so I started looking for a proper job, which was basically a sweatshop for advertising. In fact I learned more working there in 4 weeks than I did in 4 years of art school!

What year was this?

This was way back in '72 to '73. Back then we had a thing called the 3 Day Week. This was when things were going badly for Britain. I lost the advertising job eventually and had to look around for other jobs, but the trouble was I couldn't afford to travel, much less move, so I became a post-graduate teacher of art.



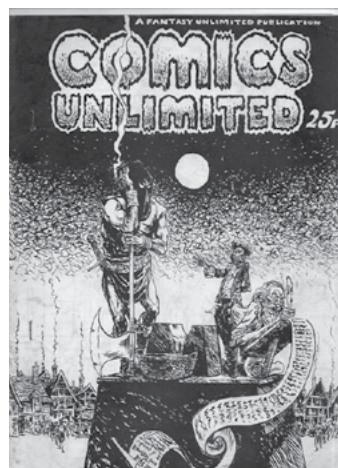
It was around this time that I became aware of small fanzines that needed artists to draw comics, fantasy art, and so on. There was a group called the British Fantasy Society and I started sending in little doodles and sketches that I was doing to them.

How exactly did you come across these fanzines?

I found a few in a store. At that time, and to my limited knowledge, there was only one shop, 'Dark They Were &

Golden Eyed' on Berwick Street in London, which I found when looking for an art material shop nearby. From the couple of fanzines I picked up (and also after joining the British Fantasy Society) I began to submit my ideas, especially as paid commercial work dried up! So I started doing my own 'thing' so to speak.

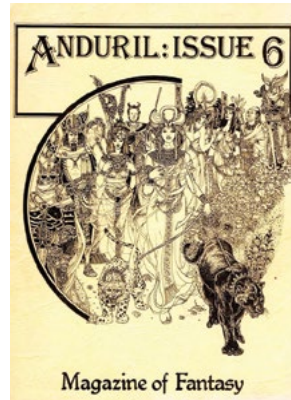
From there other magazines began to contact me and ask for submissions, several in Canada especially. In fact, after a while what spare change I had went to purchasing different types of fanzines, to the point where I owned quite a collection as my thirst for Fantasy grew.



## GAMES WORKSHOP

So how did you get involved with Games Workshop?

By 1975 my work had appeared in some comic fanzine covers, but it was my cover art, kindly used by John Martin [publisher], for a zine called Anduril that was spotted by somebody at White Dwarf, in the early days of Games Workshop. Steve Jackson contacted me asking if I wanted to draw for them, and unlike the fanzines they were paying!



What was it like working for Games Workshop in the early days?

Fairly lonely... The only name at first I was aware of was Steve Jackson, who besides letters also spoke to me on the phone. Other editors did contact me later including Ian Livingston, but really as far as White Dwarf is concerned John Blanche is the only one I remember.

Were you mainly freelance or did you work "in house" with other artists?

I worked from home, by the late 70's I was a full-time art teacher and worked on any other art on my own time, so I was never "in house" but freelance. The only other artists who worked there are the names and work seen in the White Dwarf magazine. They began to send me invoices to sign over the rights of what I drew, but I just ignored them as I was not prepared to sign over the rights to my work and, luckily for me, this did not appear to matter, and they kept sending me work. (I suspect as I tried to never miss a deadline).



What was your involvement in the Fighting Fantasy series?

I drew illustrations for the first two books, but then I gave up my teaching job in this country [UK] to teach abroad in New Guinea, and I asked Puffin [the publisher] if that was going to be a problem and they said, "Oh yes it is! Your art could get lost! We can't have someone sending artwork from halfway across the world!" Which was total rubbish, because all that time that I was abroad I was sending comic strips to DC Thomson and none of it ever got lost.







I was away from 1983-86, teaching art in New Guinea (great kids!), and the only reason I came back [to the UK] was because I was offered a totally different job that fell through. So asked Puffin if they needed any work and they said, "Yes we'd love to have you!" That's why there's a huge gap between Book 2 and Book 30-something.

**What was your involvement in the boardgame version of The Warlock of Firetop Mountain?**



For 'The Warlock of Firetop Mountain', I designed the playing cards, and the other was 'Doctor Who: The Game of Time & Space,' where I produced these small half-an-inch drawings for the punch cards.

**What was it like working with the game designers/writers at Games Workshop?**

I did not dislike it and found the work enjoyable till I was "dumped" by the main part of the company. I was never asked to drop in, or chat more about what I was doing other than about illustrating the needs of an article.



## TSR

**I think for a lot of U.S. readers, or maybe it was just me, we first saw your artwork in the Fiend Folio. How did that book come about, and what was it like working on it?**

Games Workshop had been discussing the idea for a game book and had been talking to Gary Gygax. I was contacted to do a few new pieces for the Fiend Folio, some of which had already appeared in White Dwarf. They also asked if I could lend them some of my older work, which I did. (And I stress the word "lend," because they never returned anything!)

**I've heard similar stories concerning TSR... Did you ever get any of these pieces returned?**

Nope! Though some mysteriously turn up now and again.

**What sort of art direction was given for the Fiend Folio?**

Usually it was just a description, most of which came from White Dwarf. You were given a few lines, "Here's the description, draw an illustration to support that," and if you look at most of the people who were British from that production it seemed we all got the same thing. For example the "Githyanki", the writer, who was only fifteen when he did it, he of course says, "Well I created the "Githyanki", and of course he did, but it was my image which was made, and then the cover artist copied my art to make into his.

There were some monsters, for example the "Death Knight," that was a reworking of something that I had drawn for myself. On the front page there's a picture of the creature, hooved feet and all the rest of it. They took my name off of







it, which I was annoyed about. That's another original that I never got back by the way...

**Sounds a bit chaotic, but also sounds like you had a lot of freedom, is that right?**

Mainly yes. I did have a couple of changes to be made regarding four 'monsters,' but that was primarily because the description I was given to work from was either confusing (to me), or an element had been left out. The hardest thing funnily enough was that the size of the art needed to be small and sometimes making the image fit was a stinker.

**Do you have a favorite illustration from that book?**

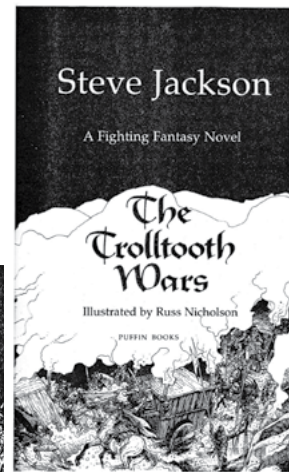
Mainly my own 'extra' drawings I was asked to loan to the book as they had been drawn for myself; the look of the "Grell," and the original look of the "Githyanki" for which I was then asked to create a full page scene for each for the book. Also the "Death Knight" who was really a reworking of an early piece of my own.

**There are so many classic monsters from Fiend Folio that you personally drew. Do you like the way some of these monsters have evolved over the years with different artists at the helm?**

Best I don't comment, haha! Although I get a bit miffed when someone else colours my work without my knowledge or consent.

Earlier you mentioned a book where you drew all the pieces and handled the layout, etc. What was this project?

The Trolltooth Wars by Steve Jackson, 1989. I was sent what I thought was the complete to be published transcript of the book and told to illustrate and decide on the layout as I saw fit, which I did. I went for a "look" that reminded me of the old Pulp Magazines of the 20's & 30's, with split pages, half pages, as well as full pages, and a complete illustrated title page as a double page spread. This was fun and I enjoyed working on it. There were two more books in that series, but I was not allowed such freedom again.





## GOODMAN GAMES

Your most recent work for Goodman Games are two covers for adventure modules set in Jack Vance's Dying Earth series. What can you tell me about working on this project?

Joseph gave me the opportunity to work on a favourite sci-fi/fantasy writer of mine, Jack Vance. From a list of four scenarios he offered me two to choose, which I'm at present colouring. In each case they relate to adventurers invading a sorcerer wizard's sanctum. The first of which they think him dead and the second where they go into the past thinking the owner is away.

So you're a big fan of Jack Vance?

Yes, I had read the first two books, in fact owned the second in the Dying Earth series till it was damaged in a storm, along with a lot of other books in my collection. Recently I bought the completed four books and re-read them to help with my ideas. In fact one element that appears within the piece is loosely based on a character found in one of the stories.

Are you doing anything different for these pieces?

Well I usually color my illustrations using Photoshop, so there are few pieces that actually exist in color, but for these covers I'm doing something different. I'm probably being a bit rash, cause I'm experimenting. (I do that every now and

again.) For these I'm using watercolor paints and I'm going to do the whole picture in watercolor.

That will be interesting! Why watercolor?

I mean I like watercolor, and I do work in watercolor, but I haven't done it in a long time. I've done a couple of experiments, so far I like how they've turned out.

Will these pieces still have your signature line work?

Yes! I've scanned the roughs, so afterwards when I'm finished I'll scan in the painted pieces and touch up anything on Photoshop, adding in the lines if need be.

## RUSS' PROCESS

How has your process evolved over the years?

Basically when I first started, all the comic work I did for DC Thomson was done with a brush. I never used a pen. I would get the description of what I suppose to draw. I would think about it. I would look at the deadline, to make sure I could make it, then I would pencil it out. A lot of people like to use blue pencils, but I've never found that effective, I don't like the look of it.

Next I ink it up, rub out the pencil lines, then send it off. In the 60's & 70's, it was good ol' PMTs [Photo Mechanical Transfers], but of course nowadays I just send off a .tiff or .jpeg. I basically kept working like that up until the internet.

And what about today?

Today, I will start with the same process, but I try to get as much thinking time in as possible, because I believe in the principal, if you can think your way through something the better. The first thing I look for is composition, the actual structure of the picture to make it more interesting, while at the same time meet the criteria of what's been written. Then it's roughs, pencils, inking, cleaning, and sending. I found out that my wife cleans better than I do, so she actually cleans most of my artwork.

For about 3 or 4 years now, I've started using a light box. I draw up a rough, get that approved, I then blow the image in Photoshop and touch it up where necessary. I then print that out and put it onto my light box and begin drawing the final piece.

Some of my early work I believe is better not for any other reason than the paper. The kind of paper I used to be able to get, which I bought as much of it as I could afford then, you can't get it now. Bristol Board is just not the same as it was anyways. I prefer paper with a little more tooth, and I don't mean like watercolor, just something that'll soak up the ink better.

One of the trademarks of your art is the line work. How long does it take you to finish a full page piece from start to finish?

It'll take me a week, maybe three, to think about what the picture will be, the composition, etc. Dreaming is the wrong word, but I do think about it while I sleep. I'll be working



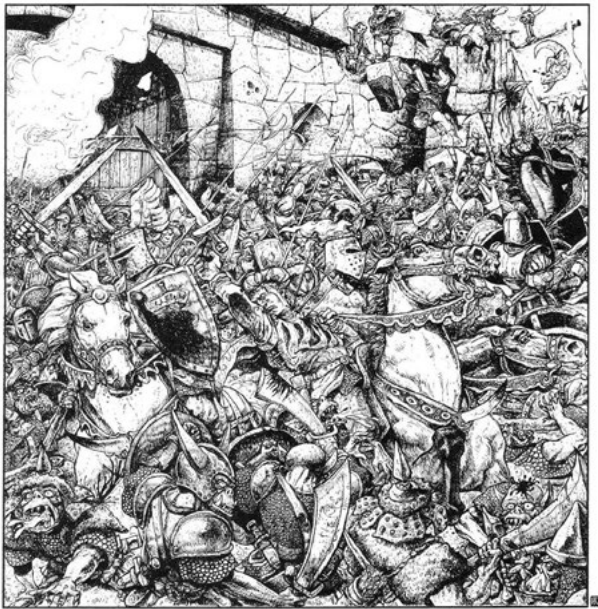


on it, go to sleep, and then wake up and start working on the roughs.

I've slowed down a lot. I had cancer and just before I went in for the procedure I had a left-sided stroke. It took me two weeks to learn how to use my hand again, because I'm left-handed. Anyways, it takes me about two 8 hour days to finish the line-work on a full page piece but if I'm on fire as they say, I've known myself to work into the small hours of the night.

**Was the distinctive style we know your art by always there to some extent or did it emerge over time?**

It sort of evolved, the stylisation was there from when I was a boy, but got better as I drew more. In college we were encouraged to not settle on one style, but after a while as other types of commercial illustration dried up I settled and worked more or less as I do now.



**What work or artists did you admire or emulate before you became a professional?**

All art! From cave art to modern. From primitive to realistic to abstract; I am a lover of art whether ceramic, jewellery, engineering, or architecture. I do, however, have a fondness for Celtic Art, Romanesque, Northern Renaissance, Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco. Really any good art styles and good artists from comic to newspaper to fine practitioners!

**Are there any authors (Tolkien, Jack Vance, etc.) that you find inspirational?**

Too many to mention, I don't read as much as I once did, but I have a huge collection of books, as has my wife, and have tried to catch up where I can. My wife is doing better than myself at the moment!

**Speaking of writers, how do you go about working with writers and their concepts?**

I've dealt with a few writers and there are two different types. There are those who say I want this, you draw it, and then they say, "No that's not what I wanted," because they have the visual in their head. Then there are writers who write something in such a way that it's clear what they are after and I can draw it.



The best example I can give you actually is through the series The Fabled Lands, particularly working with Dave Morris. He and I were very sympatico. He first phoned me back in New Guinea, and the first work I did for him was one of his 'We are the Tiger' books.

One of the neat things about the The Fabled Lands series is that Dave didn't want traditional illustrations. What he wanted was scene setters, so I would draw things like coinage, or how the people would dress, and that's what I enjoyed doing for that series.



**Out of all your illustrations is there one that's your favorite?**

There is one, another Dave Morris book called Blood Sword which shows this thing coming around the rocks, and its claws are burning into the stone.







## GAMING & CONVENTIONS

**Do you attend many conventions?**

I've been invited to France, Belgium, Germany. All invitations, all as a guest, right? All helped the pay, etc. In this country, Britain... Nada!

**Have you attended any conventions in the United States?**

I've been invited, but when I ask if they could help with travel the silence is deafening, haha!

**You've drawn for many different gaming companies, but do you currently play any games?**

When I first got a copy of Warlock of Firetop Mountain I did actually play it, but I kept on being killed! Even though I kept taking different routes I somehow always managed to get myself killed... So after about the eighth time I thought well that's enough of this. I've played a few other games here and there...

My young students at school were trying to get something off, one of the very early games, Citadel or something, I can't remember the name of it now. They brought in all the tools and had it all set up, and we ran it during class, but that only lasted for a while.

**So you never dove deep into roleplaying games, or miniature warfare, etc.?**

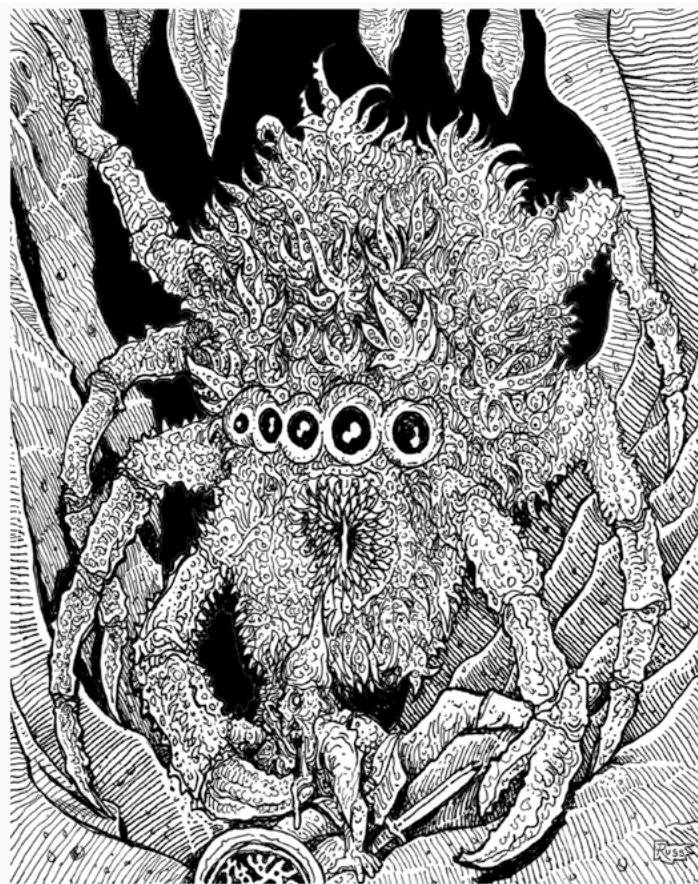
I've always been aware of it, and interested, but I've never actually played. That's the only difference really. I'm well aware of the background of games like Warhammer, Fighting Fantasy, and Fabled Lands, etc. I read an awful lot. So all I can tell you is that, yes I'm interested, yes I keep in touch with it, and if I didn't I wouldn't be doing drawing now.

**Most fans might connect your work to Games Workshop, or the Fiend Folio, but what is a project you've worked on (RPG-related or not) that you really enjoyed, and perhaps felt didn't get the attention it deserved?**



I liked working on John Martin's Anduril magazine in the '70s, and other publications through the British Fantasy Society such as Fantasy Tales and Rosemary Pardoe's M.R. James related titles like Ghost & Scholars.

Several Fighting Fantasy books from the first Warlock of Firetop Mountain and on by Steve Jack-



son and Ian Livingstone published by Puffin Books, and of course I cannot forget Dave Morris and Jamie Thomson's near magnum opus Fabled Lands [now up to book 7 of a planned 12].

Goodman Games titles (but that's a given), and the project that is yet to be released, relating to Calific.com and the world named 'Yezmyr.' That product is entitled Marooned Across Space and Time. It was going to be a trio of modules with card stock covers, but now it's going to be a hardback. This is a project that I've worked on and off for ten years and will soon be available!



**What does the future hold in store for Russ Nicholson?**

At the moment I'm busily trying to copy and scan a lot of my artwork for a possible book. I don't know how I'm going to get it published, but that is the principle. I have a couple of problems with my health, one which tells me each day I'm blessed. I can be cynical at the disastrous behaviour of our present world leaders, but on the whole I look to the new and, corny

as it sounds, live in hope, and of course, the next interesting drawing task offered!

*Imagery reproduced in this interview is copyrighted by its respective rights holders. No challenge to copyrights is intended. Materials are reproduced for journalistic purposes only.*